

*Historiography, Hagiography, and the Making of the
Coptic “Church of the Martyrs” in Early Islamic Egypt*

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IN THE EARLY twelfth century a manuscript was copied for the famous White Monastery in the vicinity of Akhmīm, ancient Panopolis, by a certain Victor, who further identified himself in Coptic as “the son of Shenoute, the son of Menas, the man from the Christ-loving city of Pan.” He dated his manuscript once by the Egyptian month of Parmoute (March–April), in the year of the Martyrs 828 and the year of the Saracens 501 (1122 or 1123 CE), and once again, in Greek, by the Roman month of April (18th), giving the *anno mundi*, and again the year of the Martyrs, the year of the Saracens, as well as an unfortunately mutilated reference to the moon, possibly an Islamic dating.¹ The donors of the manuscript are presented as “the pious, truly honored brother, the honorable archon Wezir, son of Joseph, and his son the deacon John.”²

What the colophon of this manuscript contains is a sort of stratigraphy of the country’s past, revealing the cultural layers that had settled in the Nile Valley century after century. It has Greek and Arabic place names next to Egyptian, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic dating systems. The scribe uses two languages, Greek and Coptic, and mentions personal names that range from the Bible through ancient Egypt to Rome. For himself, he gives a double patronymic, according to Arab usage, although he follows the Byzantine simple patronymic for the donor. One should remember that at the time the Church’s flock was made up almost exclusively of Arabic-speakers, who no longer understood either of the languages used in the colophon. The conservation of these traditions at such a late date certainly has something to say about the self-perception of medieval Egyptian Christians. Most of the practices and traditions involved here, however, date back to the first two Islamic centuries, when the Egyptian Church was struggling to find its place in the new world order. It is on this formative period that

1 The Era of the Martyrs, which will be discussed later in this essay, was used by the medieval Coptic Church and had as its starting point the accession of Diocletian in 284; see R. Bagnall and K. Worp, “The Era of Diocletian and of the Martyrs,” in *The Chronological Systems of Byzantine Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 2003), 63–87, and L. S. B. MacCoull and K. A. Worp, “The Era of the Martyrs,” in *Miscellanea papyrologica in occasione del bicentenario dell’edizione della*

Charta Borgiana, ed. M. Capasso, G. M. Savorelli, and R. Pintaudi (Florence, 1990), 2:375–408.

2 Trans. W. E. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1905), 231–33, no. 489. See also A. van Lantschoot, *Recueil des colophons des manuscrits chrétiens d’Égypte* (Leuven, 1929), 133–37, no. LXXX. Leslie MacCoull translates this as “the honourable archon and vizier, son of Joseph...,” taking the (well-

attested) name Wezir to be a repetition of the Greek *archon*. It seems quite improbable, however, that the name of the principal donor should be omitted from the onomastic formula, which would then consist only of his title and patronymic, a rather strange procedure: L. S. B. MacCoull, “Patronage and the Social Order in Coptic Egypt,” in *Egitto e storia antica* (Bologna, 1989), 501; repr. in her *Coptic Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, 1993), no. XVII.

I wish to concentrate, attempting to analyze one aspect of the gradual construction of a new identity both for the Church and for the community it represented.

There is a great amount of literature on the phenomenon of lingering traditions, essentially centered on the notions of survival or continuity. Much of it is based on the latent idea that cultures change with much difficulty, and tends to consider that through some sort of passive resistance traditional thought patterns will “survive” any important ideological or socioeconomic change, which is implicitly seen as coming from without or from above—or both. In the case of Egypt, the search for elements of pharaonic culture in Christian times has spawned an impressive amount of literature. One of the first to systematically analyze Coptic culture in terms of ancient Egyptian “survivals” was Siegfried Morenz, who initiated an entire field of studies that German scholars have baptized *Survival-Forschung*.³ Their views have been challenged by several specialists of late antique Egypt, for whom the country, for all its personality, was at that time an integral part of the later Roman empire and of the social, intellectual, and religious world that went with it.⁴

As any other region, late antique Egypt had its own distinctive culture, and it can be confused neither with any other moment in the history of the country nor with any other province of the later Roman empire. As in most preindustrial societies, language, landscape, techniques, and the population’s everyday worries hardly changed over time, and there was much continuity in the overall way of life.⁵ The question that arises concerns the significance of those observed continuities, and the related problem of the correspondence between acts on the one hand and the thoughts or beliefs that underlie them on the other. Here, Egyptian death rituals have, perhaps quite predictably, attracted the most interest. Mummification, sustained by a complex theology in pharaonic times, continued without interruption in the Graeco-Roman and Christian periods, albeit with differences in the embalming techniques and the exterior forms, and was widely practiced by the

3 A general view of his ideas can be found in S. Morenz, “Fortwirken altägyptischer Elemente in christlicher Zeit,” in *Koptische Kunst: Christentum am Nil* (Essen, 1963), 55–59; see also the classic “Altägyptischer und hellenistisch-paulinischer Jenseitsglaube bei Schenute,” *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 1 (1953): 250–55. For examples of *Survival-Forschung* see M. Krause, “Heidentum, Gnosis und Manichäismus, ägyptische Survivals,” in *Ägypten in spätantik-*

christlicher Zeit: Einführung in die koptische Kultur (Wiesbaden, 1998), 81–116, esp. the last section: “Das Weiterleben ägyptischer Vorstellungen und Bräuche”; see also H. Behlmer, “Ancient Egyptian Survivals in Coptic Literature: An Overview,” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms*, ed. A. Loprieno (Leiden, 1996), 567–90. For a discussion of this theme see A. Papaconstantinou, “Aux marges de l’Empire ou au centre du monde? De l’Égypte des Byzantins à celle des historiens,” in *Journal*

of Juristic Papyrology 35 (2005), 195–236.

4 Most notably, though not exclusively, R. Bagnall, “A Mediterranean Society,” chap. 9 in *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993); see esp. 321–25.

5 See the case made for religion by D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt* (Princeton, 1998).

non-Egyptian population.⁶ But can one really consider that the Egyptians practicing mummification from the fifth century onward and declaring themselves to be Christians were venerating Osiris without knowing it? In fact, they seem to have quite clearly distinguished traditional practice, which involved great luxury and decoration, from their own, more simple ways.⁷ Mummification as such need not have posed a problem. After all, the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection was so perfectly compatible with the practice that such an undisputed figure as Augustine of Hippo could present it as the sign that the Egyptians were the only Christians to really believe in the Resurrection.⁸

In this case, as in many others, the meaning today's scholars impose on the practices of a historical society does not coincide with the interpretation of those practices held by the very members of that society. Whatever its justifications, this discrepancy remains problematic. "Survival" scholars tend to consider that the same literary or ritual act always presupposes the same belief or conception, be it unconsciously. Important though the question is, I leave it aside here. Instead, I argue that, even though local characteristics were quite naturally present, much of what is identified as typically Egyptian in postconquest Coptic culture was in part a construct of the Egyptian Monophysite (or non-Chalcedonian) Church searching for a new identity and a new legitimacy. In this quest it was important to that Church to mark its indigenous origin.

When 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ conquered Egypt on behalf of the caliph 'Umar in 641, the Monophysite Church was in an ambivalent position. Although its rivals, the Chalcedonians, were the state Church and benefited from imperial support, the Monophysite Church still managed to maintain not only a parallel church hierarchy in Alexandria, with two competing patriarchs holding office at the same time, but also a parallel network of bishoprics that covered the entire valley—even though the non-Chalcedonian hierarchy had by then been ousted from the episcopal cities and many bishops had settled in monasteries.⁹ Its local and regional links, in particular with neighboring Syria,

6 F. Dunand and R. Lichtenberg, "Pratiques et croyances funéraires en Égypte romaine," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin, 1995), II.18.5:3216–3315 and F. Dunand, "Between Tradition and Innovation: Egyptian Funerary Practices in Late Antiquity," in *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700*, ed. R. S. Bagnall (Cambridge, 2006), 163–84.

7 See e.g., the Bohairic version of

the *Life of Pisenthios of Koptos*, published in É. Amélineau, "Étude sur le christianisme en Égypte au septième siècle: Un évêque de Keft au VIIe siècle," *Mémoires de l'Institut d'Égypte* 2 (1889): 406–11: while hiding in a tomb during the Persian occupation, Pisenthios revives a pagan mummy he found there and talks to it (this reference is due to the anonymous *DOP* reader).

8 *Sermo* 361, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, PL 39:1605.

9 See E. Wipszycka, "Institutional Church," in Bagnall, *Egypt 300–700*, 331–49.

were strong. Since the Council of Chalcedon, an imposing body of polemical literature had piled up on both sides, and its production intensified toward the end of the sixth century, giving the undoubtedly false impression that the Chalcedonian question was the most important issue in the country from the fifth century onward. After the conquest, this trend continued, and even intensified as a result of Muslim “even-handed indifference” toward the various communities and their previous privileges. As Peter Brown put it, “unlike the days of Justinian, no group could use state power to silence the other.”¹⁰ This did not mean, however, that neither of them tried to capture their new masters’ benevolence. Still in the 760s, Chalcedonians and Monophysites would bring rival petitions before the Muslim governor.¹¹ At the same time, the conquest reinforced ecclesiastical power and authority within the Christian communities. The Church gained in status as it came to regulate cases of internal conflict and to mediate between the local Christians and the governing Muslims. The non-Muslim “people of the Book” were expected to abide, as the Muslims themselves did, by the laws of their scriptures, so the Church inevitably played a fundamental role in defining codes of conduct.¹²

Even more than in the preceding period, the Church also became the most important text-producing institution, at least for literature and formal documents. Surviving documentary papyri from the period, when they do not concern tax collection in some way, are often contracts made between private individuals and some monastery, and thus bear the monastery’s redactional mark.¹³ Even private letters on ostraca, a modest medium, are written by members of monastic communities.¹⁴ Much of the narrative source material consists of a variety of authorized writings whose main task is to defend the Monophysite Church’s legitimacy against the Chalcedonian Church, which, although it had lost its status of state Church, may have benefited symbolically from its association with the Christian empire. The first stage in the construction of this legitimacy was the interpretation of recent events in a way that would support Monophysite claims. The incompleteness and inaccuracy of the earliest Christian narratives of the conquest have rightly

10 *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2003), 309, both quotations.

11 Michael I, *History of the Patriarchs*, PO 5 (1910): 124–26.

12 For a general introduction see T. G. Wilfong, “The Non-Muslim Communities: Christian Communities,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. C. F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 175–97. Not focused on Egypt alone, but more specifically centered on questions of

authority and regulation is N. Edelby, “The Legislative Autonomy of the Christians in Islamic Lands” (translation of an article first published in 1951), in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, ed. R. Hoyland, *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World* 18 (Aldershot, 2004), 37–82, to which add Hoyland’s remarks in the introduction, xv–xvi.

13 One example of this is described in A. Papaconstantinou, “Θεῖα οἰκονομία: Les actes

thébains de donation d’enfants ou la gestion monastique de la pénurie,” in *Mélanges Gilbert Dagron*, TM 14 (Paris, 2002), 517–26.

14 This reflects that most of the documents preserved come from monastic archives, which fact is itself significant: monasteries probably had a higher level of literacy than the rest of society.

been noted by historians.¹⁵ The unreliability stems perhaps from the specific aim of these texts, which was not to give a military account of the conquest. By explaining the defeat of the Byzantine army, and reevaluating the country's religious history during the two previous centuries, they sought above all to define a new identity for the Egyptian Christian *dhimmis*, an identity that would be solidly structured around the Monophysite Church and its institutions.

Among the surviving authored literature, only two works are historical. The first, a *Chronicle*, although secular in scope, was written by a churchman, John, bishop of Nikiu.¹⁶ The second is an official church history, called *History of the Coptic Church* and written by George the Archdeacon. Both treat of the conquest and the years that immediately followed it; but both are difficult to use because of transmission problems. The original version of the *Chronicle* is lost, and known only through a text that has been translated twice and abbreviated. As for the *History of the Coptic Church*, originally compiled in Coptic, it is known only through an Arabic version included in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, compiled in the late eleventh century. This last work is a collection of biographies of successive Alexandrian bishops, many of whom were celebrated as saints, which gives the whole work a strong hagiographical flavor. George the Archdeacon's initial redaction of the *History of the Coptic Church* dates back to the late seventh or very early eighth century and covers events from 477 to his time. George

15 The only comprehensive work on the conquest of Egypt is still A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion*, 2nd rev. ed. by P. M. Fraser (Oxford, 1978; 1st ed. 1902); for a recent discussion see R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13 (Princeton, 1997), 574–90.

16 The *Chronicle* was first transcribed from a single manuscript and translated by M. H. Zotenberg, "Chronique de Jean, évêque de Nikiou: Texte éthiopien et traduction," *Notices et extraits* 24.1 (1883): 125–608. A translation incorporating readings from a second manuscript is R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu* (London, 1917). On a third manuscript witness and the inadequacies of the previous two works see M. Rodinson, "Notes sur le texte de Jean de Nikiou," in *IV Congresso internazionale di studi etiopici*, vol. 2, *Sezione linguistica*, Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Quaderno

191 (Rome, 1974), 127–37. Studies include M. H. Zotenberg, "Mémoire sur la chronique byzantine de Jean, évêque de Nikiou," *JA*, 7th ser., 10 (1877): 451–517; 12 (1878): 245–347; and 13 (1879): 291–385; A. Carile, "Giovanni di Nikius, cronista bizantino-copto del VII secolo," *FR* 121/22 (1981): 103–55; J.-M. Carrié, "Jean de Nikiou et sa *Chronique*: Une écriture 'égyptienne' de l'histoire?" in *Événement, récit, histoire officielle: L'écriture de l'histoire dans les monarchies antiques*, ed. N. Grimal and M. Baud (Paris, 2003), 155–72. Ever since Zotenberg's edition, scholars have accepted the 690s for the *Chronicle*'s composition. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 153, would date it around 650, due to the absence of any reference to the author's post-650 ecclesiastical career. Although the argument adduced is hardly decisive, considering that what we have today is a strongly abbreviated and perhaps reworked version of the original text (whose author had meanwhile fallen from grace), the suggestion is indeed tempting, for a number of reasons impossible to develop here; see also *ibid.*, 152 n. 125.

was close to the patriarchate, and his work, as far as it can be retrieved, reflects its views.¹⁷ Practically all other literature is broadly either theological or hagiographical, including many martyrologies, and originates from monastic circles both in Upper and in Lower Egypt or from the circles around the patriarchate of Alexandria.¹⁸

In these early texts, we find radically anti-Byzantine discourse, centered on the question of heresy and orthodoxy. For John of Nikiu, who wrote the first account of the conquest, the reasons for the empire's defeat were clear: "This expulsion (of the Romans) and victory of the Moslem is due to the wickedness of the emperor Heraclius and his persecution of the Orthodox through the patriarch Cyrus. This was the cause of the ruin of the Romans and the subjugation of Egypt by the Moslem."¹⁹ This interpretation is echoed by George the Archdeacon in his biography of the Monophysite patriarch Benjamin (622–661), who lived through the Arab conquest: "And the Lord abandoned the army of the Romans before him, as a punishment for their corrupt faith, and because of the anathemas uttered against them, on account of the council of Chalcedon, by the ancient fathers."²⁰ In his eyes, the legitimate leader of the Egyptian Church was none other than Benjamin, who had lived in exile for thirteen years, fleeing the persecution of the Chalcedonian patriarch Cyrus.²¹ His sanctity was immediately recog-

17 The relevant chapters of the *History of the Patriarchs* are edited and translated by B. Evetts (whose translations I use here) in *PO* 1 (1907): 105–214, 383–518, and 5 (1910): 3–215. The standard study is J. den Heijer, *Mawhūb ibn Mansūr ibn Mufarrig et l'historiographie copto-arabe: Étude sur la composition de l'Histoire des patriarches d'Alexandrie*, CSCO 513, Subsidia 83 (Leuven, 1989). A useful overview can be found in idem, "History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria," *CoptEnc*, 4:1238–42. The earliest recension of the work, in which some passages differ from the above, is edited by C. F. Seybold, *Severus ibn al Muqaffa': Alexandrinische Patriarchengeschichte von S. Marcus bis Michael I (61–767), nach der ältesten 1266 geschriebenen Hamburger Handschrift im arabischen Urtext herausgegeben* (Hamburg, 1912), with the narrative on the conquest at 98–101. Substantial passages of the latter are translated into French and commented on in J. den Heijer, "La conquête arabe vue par les historiens coptes," in *Valeur et distance: Identités et sociétés en Égypte*, ed. C. Décobert (Paris, 2000), 229–31. On the pervading problem of multilayer redaction in Near Eastern sources see the discussion

in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 34–40.

18 T. Orlandi, "Introduzione alla letteratura copta," in *Omèlie copte* (Turin, 1981), 7–23; "Coptic Literature," in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. B. A. Pearson and J. E. Goehring (Philadelphia, 1986), 51–81; "Hagiography," *CoptEnc*, 4:1191–97; "Letteratura copta e cristianesimo nazionale egiziano," in *L'Egitto cristiano: Aspetti e problemi in età tardoantica*, ed. A. Camplani (Rome, 1997), 39–120; "Koptische Literatur," in *Ägypten in spätantike-christlicher Zeit: Einführung in die koptische Kultur*, ed. M. Krause (Wiesbaden, 1998), 117–47; S. Emmel, "Coptic Literature in the Byzantine and Early Islamic World," in Bagnall, *Egypt 300–700*, 83–102.

19 *Chronicle* 121 (trans. Charles, 200). This is a common topos in Christian interpretations of the conquest: in general, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 524–26. One also finds its mirror image in Muslim accounts of their victory: see, for instance, F. M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, 1998), 177–78, and C. F. Robinson, "Prophecy and Holy Men in Early Islam," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle*

Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown, ed. J. Howard-Johnston and P. A. Hayward (Oxford, 1999), 251–52.

20 *History of the Patriarchs*, Benjamin, *PO* 1 (1948): 492–93. The author is probably alluding to a letter by Severus of Antioch similarly quoted by John of Nikiu, *Chronicle* 120.55 (Charles, 198).

21 On Benjamin, see C. D. G. Müller, "Benjamin I, 38. Patriarch von Alexandrien," *Le Muséon* 69 (1956): 313–40; "Neues über Benjamin I, 38. und Agathon, 39. Patriarchen von Alexandrien," *Le Muséon* 72 (1959): 323–47; "Stellung und Haltung der koptischen Patriarchen des 7. Jahrhunderts gegenüber islamischer Obrigkeit und Islam," in *Acts of the Second International Congress of Coptic Study, Roma, 22–26 September 1980*, ed. T. Orlandi and F. Wisse (Rome, 1985), 203–13. One should be wary of Müller's otherwise extremely useful presentation in that he generally tends to adopt the point of view of the Monophysite sources, especially on the delicate question of Benjamin's relations with the Muslims (partly echoed in this by Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 132–35).

nized by the conqueror 'Amr. When Benjamin appeared before him, 'Amr exclaimed, "Verily, in all the lands of which we have taken possession hitherto I have never seen a man of God like this man." So impressed was 'Umar's great general, that he asked Benjamin, we are told, to pray for him during his upcoming campaign for the conquest of the Pentapolis.²² The earliest recension of the *History of the Patriarchs* even has "the king of the Muslims" send 'Amr to Egypt only because he became aware of Benjamin's plight.²³

This narrative is quite characteristic of the author's ambivalence toward the Arabs. Written half a century after the facts, it constructs a solid historical foundation for the Monophysite Church's claim to supremacy under the Muslims.²⁴ In a single passage, George the Archdeacon defines the relative status of the three main religious groups of postconquest Egypt. The position of the Muslims, of course, was clear to all. What really mattered was the relative position of the two Christian Churches. George denies that the Chalcedonian Church had any real popular basis in the country, going so far as to assert that most of its monks or laymen had been converted by the Chalcedonian patriarch Cyrus, "some of them through persecution, and some by bribes and honours, and some by persuasion and deceit."²⁵ When Benjamin "sat among his people a second time [after his exile]... he drew to himself most of the people whom Heraclius, the heretical king, had led astray; for he induced them to return to the right faith by his gentleness, exhorting them with courtesy and consolation."²⁶

In defining the religious boundaries of Benjamin's flock, the author of his biography makes a clear difference with the Muslims, "circumcised in the flesh, not by the law," and following the teachings of a man

²² *History of the Patriarchs*, 496–97.

The added value accorded to the recognition of sanctity by a stranger or infidel is often exploited in biographies of Muḥammad, here Christian monks are described as witnesses to his proximity to God. See U. Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims; A Textual Analysis*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 5 (Princeton, 1995), 49–52; T. Sizgorich, "Narrative and Community in Islamic Late Antiquity," *Past and Present* 185 (2004), 26–29; and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 476–79, with a translation of the earliest occurrence of the story in the Islamic tradition, from Ibn Ishāq's biography of the Prophet.

²³ Den Heijer, "Conquête," 230, § F (n. 17 above), a passage that was deleted in the later, common version.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

²⁵ *History of the Patriarchs*, 491. This idea is also implicit in the *Life of Samuel of Kalamun*: A. Alcock, *The Life of Samuel of Kalamun by Isaac the Presbyter* (Warminster, 1983). This last text was probably written just before the Arab conquest, but reworked in the late eighth century; see A. Papaconstantinou, "Hagiography in Coptic," in *Byzantine Hagiography: A Handbook*, ed. S. Efthymiadis (Aldershot, forthcoming). For the full argument in favor of an early date of composition see Butler, *The Arab Conquest*, 185 and n. 2 (n. 15 above), and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 286 n. 86.

²⁶ *History of the Patriarchs*, 497.

As a matter of course I have not modified the translations I used. I did, however, replace the term "prince" in Evetts's translation with "king," since the Arabic has *malik*, and the difference is quite significant.

“from the southern districts, that is to say, from Mecca or its neighbourhood.”²⁷ The Egyptians, by contrast, were both indigenous and Christian. However, the doctrinal divisions of Egyptian Christianity were a threat to the unity—indeed to the survival—of a community that was now no longer dominant. Drawing from the distinction between Christianity and Islam, John of Nikiu and George the Archdeacon introduced an ethnic and territorial element in what until then was a purely religious division: the Chalcedonians were identified with the Romans, and the Monophysites with the local Egyptians. As the story goes, the Romans left the country after their defeat, and the Christian community that remained in Egypt had a common ethnic origin, a privileged position in the landscape, and a common history of suffering at the hands of foreigners. The Egyptians, speakers of the Coptic language, thus turned into the Copts, the indigenous population of the Valley and members of the Coptic, that is to say anti-Chalcedonian, Church. Thus, the terms defining the group acquired a meaning that was simultaneously religious and ethnic.²⁸

In a parallel development, the Romans were gradually constructed as the imperial, foreign oppressors, whose theology was heretical and whose faith was corrupt. This was instrumental in bringing out more vividly the idea of an orthodox, local, suffering community. In various ways, Benjamin’s biography highlights the themes of suffering and persecution, which were to become extremely important in the self-definition of the Coptic Church. Like the pagan Romans of the first three centuries, the Chalcedonian Romans had long tried to impose their own religious creed on the pious and courageous Egyptians. Like the great Athanasius, Benjamin was forced into exile to escape persecution from heretical imperial power. His family was nevertheless blessed with martyrdom through the death at the hands of the Romans of his brother Menas, who bore the name of a popular local martyr.²⁹ “Real” Egyptians resisted persecution much more efficiently than foreigners: “All the churches and monasteries which belonged to the virgins and monks had been defiled by Heraclius the heretic, when he forced them to accept the faith of Chalcedon, except this monastery alone; for the inmates of it were exceedingly powerful, being Egyptian by race and all of them natives without a stranger among them.”³⁰ In fact, the capacity of Egyptians to endure pain or persecution is one of many Greek clichés about Egypt, repeated throughout classical and late antiquity.³¹

27 Ibid., 492.

28 See C. Décobert, “Introduction: Formes et substances des construits identitaires,” in *Valeur et distance: Identités et sociétés en Égypte*, ed. C. Décobert (Paris, 2000), 24.

29 *History of the Patriarchs*, 491–92.

30 Ibid., 498.

31 See Papaconstantinou, “Aux marges” (n. 3 above), 212.

It is not surprising that the Egyptians chose it for their own literary production as one of their defining characteristics, considering how well it fit the motif of persecution both as a legitimating device and as a founding myth for the community.

In the eighth century, this emphasis on persecution was reinforced by a surge in the production of martyrological narratives.³² The historical significance of this body of literature has consistently been assessed in terms of continuity with the glorious Egyptian past. Most of the research devoted to those texts has focused on the delicate question of literary themes and motifs. As early as 1913, E. A. Wallis Budge noted several elements borrowed by Coptic authors from the ancient Egyptian tradition. The imagery of the journey of the dead was one of them, in particular the crossing of a river in a boat of gold. Even though this motif is also present in the Hellenic tradition, what he found particularly striking was the use of the ancient name *Amente* to describe the otherworld. After examining several other examples, Budge concluded that the Christian discourse of late martyrologies was but a veil hiding conceptions that were essentially ancient Egyptian: "From first to last the literature of the Egyptian Christians affords proof that they never succeeded in removing from their minds a number of religious beliefs, and eschatological notions, and mythological legends, which were the product of their pagan ancestors."³³

Since then, there have been many attempts to show the persistence of ancient Egyptian literary motifs in late Coptic hagiography. The most important both in scale and scope was Theofried Baumeister's *Martyr invictus*.³⁴ Baumeister defined a corpus of martyrs' *passiones* with strong similarities in their construction and choice of themes, to which he gave the name *koptischer Konsens*. He concentrated especially on one motif, which he considered essential, that of the "enduring life" (unzerstörbares Leben), the narrative of how the martyr's body, after being tortured, broken, torn apart, or burned, is reconstructed several times by an angel before the fatal, final blow.³⁵ Baumeister traced this legend back to ancient Egypt and claimed it reproduced the thought world of the ancient Egyptians. The repeated healings and resuscitations were a sign of the importance afforded by Egyptians to the integrity of the body. To reinforce his case, Baumeister devoted a whole

32 For the chronology of Coptic martyrologies see Papaconstantinou, "Hagiography in Coptic."

33 "Egyptian Mythology in Coptic Writings," in *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London, 1913), lxi–lxxii (quotation lxi).

34 *Martyr invictus: Der Märtyrer als*

Sinnbild der Erlösung in der Legende und im Kult der frühen koptischen Kirche; Zur Kontinuität des ägyptischen Denkens, Forschungen zur Volkskunde 46 (Münster, 1972). Other works include W. Kosack, *Die Legende im Koptischen: Untersuchungen zur Volksliteratur Ägyptens* (Bonn, 1970) and W. Schenkel, *Kultmythos und Märtyrer-*

legende: Zur Kontinuität des ägyptischen Denkens, Göttinger Orientforschungen, IV. Reihe: Ägypten 5 (Wiesbaden, 1977); see the review by M. van Esbroeck in *AB* 96 (1978): 232.

35 Baumeister, *Martyr invictus*, 149ff.

chapter to continuity of practice and belief from the ancient cult of the dead to the Christian cult of the martyrs.

Like much of the “survival” research, Baumeister’s analysis of Coptic hagiographical texts does not take into sufficient consideration the many concurrent classical and Biblical motifs. An Egyptian explanation is systematically given where other interpretations could come into play.³⁶ Like all literatures, Egyptian literature evolved over time, selectively including and excluding elements with which it had come into contact. In the late seventh and eighth centuries it was quite naturally the heir of a long line of Hellenic, Biblical, and local Egyptian literary traditions.³⁷ A selective search for one or the other can lead to often appealing, but always partial, results. This qualification can be extended to Baumeister’s treatment of religious practice. For instance, he considers the lamps in Egyptian martyrs’ shrines as a mark of continuity with the ancient Egyptian practice of lighting lamps over tombs, but he ignores the lamps that were in contemporary martyr shrines all over the Mediterranean.³⁸

Despite its bias, *Martyr invictus*, a well-documented and nuanced work, has become a classic, not least because its author was the first to take these martyrologies seriously and to consider they could reveal something about the society that produced them. The notion of *koptischer Konsens* has gained wide acceptance among specialists of hagiography. But even though Baumeister inserted those texts in their wider hagiographical context in his introductory chapter, what interested him and formed the core of his book was the “Egyptian” motif he saw as central to their construction. In concentrating on the theme of the enduring life, he largely ignored the other characteristics of late Coptic martyrologies. The similarity between the various stories is indeed extremely striking, not just in their themes and motifs, but also in their wording. The authors obviously worked with a series of blueprints that circulated within the closed circle of the Egyptian Church.³⁹ The choice of themes is quite significant, and reveals a strong urge to put martyrological literature in a local idiom. It has certainly contributed to the general impression among scholars that the texts are

36 A good example is given by H. Quecke, “Ich habe nichts hinzugefügt und nichts weggenommen”: Zur Wahrheitsbeteuerung koptischer Martyrien,” in *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur: Studien zum Gedenken an E. Otto* (Wiesbaden, 1977), 399–416. See also J. Zandee, “Traditions pharaoniques et influences extérieures dans les légendes coptes,” *Chronique d’Égypte* 46 (1971): 211–19, which sometimes, however, goes too far in the opposite direction.

37 Baumeister dates his texts in the sixth and early seventh centuries, but the great majority was in fact composed after the conquest, most likely in the eighth century: Orlandi, “Introduzione,” 13–17 (n. 18 above); T. Orlandi, “Cycle,” *CoptEnc*, 3:667; Papaconstantinou, “Hagiography in Coptic.”

38 *Martyr invictus*, 54–65.

39 E. A. E. Reymond and J. W. B. Barns, *Four Martyrdoms from the Pierpont Morgan Coptic Codices* (Oxford, 1973), 3.

“typically Egyptian.”⁴⁰ But in fact, this local idiom is not at all limited to the persistence of a literary motif. It also involves the construction of a new narrative of the community’s origin.

A very typical feature of late Coptic hagiography is the grouping of individual martyrdoms into cycles. The most important of these is the Antioch cycle (which later developed and expanded into the Basilides cycle), in which the main characters are all somehow related to each other, and linked in one way or another to the imperial court of Diocletian at Antioch.⁴¹ In this cycle the *Martyrdom of Victor the General* seems to be a pivotal text, even though (or perhaps because) it is based on a much earlier version.⁴² Some texts, such as the martyrdoms of Apater and Erai, Epima, or Justus, are part and parcel of the cycle; but other martyrdoms are more loosely connected to it simply through reference to some common scenes or characters. Thus, in the *Martyrdom of Paese and Thekla*, there is a whole passage relating how Paese saw Victor being tortured in Alexandria and how the sight gave him courage for his own martyrdom.⁴³

Another cycle, partly overlapping, brings together texts that are purportedly the work of Julius of Aqfahs, “the scribe,” who himself eventually suffered martyrdom. After the final execution scene, a passage identifying the author runs along these lines:

*And I, Julius, wrote the records of the holy Apa Shenoufe and his brethren, from Empaiat of the Plainland; and I gave them to Traphanes, my personal servant, and he took them up to my house where I dwelt in Kbahs [Aqfahs], and left them there, [in order that] their blessing and grace might be with us continually for ever, Amen. God is my witness, and my spirit, that I, Julius, have not added to the mighty deeds of the holy saints Apa Shenoufe and his brethren, nor have I taken away (aught) from them; but the things which they did, and those which I saw (done) by them, these things I have written down.*⁴⁴

Most martyrs of the *koptischer Konsens* are closely connected. They all suffered during the Great Persecution of Diocletian. They were either Egyptians or foreigners who suffered in Egypt. Illustrious foreign saints who were very popular were given a fictitious Egyptian origin or, at least, a local resting place. Thus one legend presents the Anatolian saint

40 See the remarks by S. A. Harvey, “Introduction,” in *Encomiastica from the Pierpont Morgan Library*, ed. L. Depuydt, CSCO 544–45, scr. copt. 47–48 (Leuven, 1993), xi.

41 Orlandi, “Cycle,” 667.

42 Baumeister, *Martyr invictus*, 131–33.

43 Reymond and Barns, *Four Martyrdoms*, 156–57.

44 *Martyrdom of S. Shenoufe and his Brethren*, in Reymond and Barns (their trans. here), *Four Martyrdoms*, 220–21.

Theodore Stratelates as a native of the Upper Egyptian town of Shotep, and another tells how John the Baptist's body was taken to Alexandria during the reign of Julian.

What has been unanimously seen as the most striking characteristic of late Coptic hagiography, however, is the way it describes the tortures inflicted on the saints. When the Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye, a specialist of Greek hagiography, studied the corpus of Coptic martyrological texts available at the beginning of the 1920s, he was violently taken aback. That "misérable littérature" had an entirely artificial character, was commonplace and full of borrowed elements, it defied common sense as well as history; its extravagance and taste for the absurd was the sign of "un état de culture inférieur et une profonde indigence de la pensée."⁴⁵ This, of course, may well have been the reaction of any rationalist to any hagiographical text. Yet Delehaye was no newcomer to legendary martyrs' stories. In his *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires*, published a year earlier, he gave the general outlines of what he baptized "les passions épiques" in Latin and eastern hagiography, which he also found extravagant and removed from historical reality.⁴⁶ Evidently he felt that Coptic texts went beyond that. Even for scholars less prejudiced than Delehaye and more familiar with Coptic literature, like Eve Reymond and John Barns, Coptic martyrdoms "are hardly to be outdone by any in extravagance, improbability, or, in places, sheer absurdity; they abound in Divine and angelic visions and visitations and miracles of healing and resuscitation. The Governor's stupidity, malevolence and irascibility are alike excessive. As to the tortures employed, while few of them are individually incredible, when heaped upon the same individual they become merely ridiculous. The martyr himself, having earned severe treatment by fantastic feats or provocative rudeness, is made to display superhuman fortitude under torture; his repeated recovery from it by supernatural means leaves the mind surfeited with improbability."⁴⁷

The tortures are very improbable indeed, as one may appreciate from this tiny sample from the second martyrdom of Victor the General, who suffered four successive martyrdoms, each one a collection of such scenes of torture:

And when the Duke saw that he would not speak, he commanded his men to bring six lighted torches, and to fasten them to his sides (or ribs). And when they had done this he made them bring a number of red-hot pointed irons, and they thrust them through his belly until they came out of his back. And they did these things three times to him until his skin peeled off him. Afterwards the Duke said unto him, "Wilt thou not [now] offer up sacrifice?" And the Duke commanded his men to place hot ashes upon his head, and to put a helmet [of iron] on him; and Apa Victor did not

⁴⁵ "Les martyrs d'Égypte," *AB* 40 (1922): 148.

⁴⁶ SubsHag 13b (Brussels, 1921), 236–315.

⁴⁷ Reymond and Barns, *Four Martyrdoms*, 2.

*sink under this torture. And the Duke made them to take him off the frame of the rack, and to lay him upon the bed of iron, and to kindle a fire beneath it. And he made them pour burning sulphur and pitch, [mixed with other] inflammable substances, down his throat.*⁴⁸

“A curious form of literature, dripping with blood and righteousness, and demanding a willing suspension of disbelief undreamed of by Samuel Taylor Coleridge,” noted the translator of a rather moderate martyrology.⁴⁹ Such judgments, which today may seem themselves extravagant, misunderstand the purpose of these texts and the way they should be apprehended: “not as ‘sources,’ but as texts,” as advocated by Averil Cameron concerning a different corpus.⁵⁰ They do not inform us about the persecutions, and their authors were presumably quite conscious of this. To better understand the role of these descriptions, one must insert them back into their literary and ideological context and analyze the works and the cycles as a whole.

The insistence on torture as a form of sacrifice is clearly a literary device used to make more tangible the sanctification of the martyrs’ bodies—and the greater the suffering, the greater the holiness it confers.⁵¹ During the tortures, the archangels Michael or Gabriel usually come and save the martyrs: they reconstitute their bodies, they give the “freshness of the morning dew” to the fire of furnaces, they protect them from wild animals. The parallel is often explicitly drawn with the three youths in the fiery furnace or with Daniel in the lions’ den.⁵² Before the final blow, Jesus addresses the martyr directly, in a very stereotyped speech, promising eternal glory to the martyr and great benefits to those who will tend his shrine and organize his cult:

The Saviour said to them, “Fear not; it is I who will protect your bodies, and will cause a martyr-shrine to be built for you in my name; and whoso shall give an offering to your shrine, I will fill his house with every good thing on earth; and I will cause my angels to protect their bodies and their souls in the aeons of the light. Whoso shall write the book of your martyrdom, I will write his name in the Book of Life. And I will set my blessing

⁴⁸ *Martyrdom of Victor the General*, ed. E. A. W. Budge, *Coptic Martyrdoms, etc., in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London, 1914), 275.

⁴⁹ D. N. Bell, *Mena of Nikiou, The Life of Isaac of Alexandria and The Martyrdom of Saint Macarius* (Kalamazoo, 1988), 97. The reference to Coleridge is chap. 14 of the *Biographia Literaria* (London, 1817), devoted to the *Lyrical Ballads* and to his disagreement with Wordsworth about the

nature of poetry.

⁵⁰ “Form and Meaning: The Vita Constantini and the Vita Antonii,” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. T. Hägg and P. Rousseau (Berkeley, 2000), 86.

⁵¹ See D. Frankfurter, “On Sacrifice and Residues: Processing the Potent Body,” in *Religion im kulturellen Diskurs: Festschrift für Hans G. Kippenberg zu seinem 65. Geburtstag / Religion in Cultural Discourse:*

Essays in Honor of Hans G. Kippenberg on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday, ed. B. Luchesi and K. von Stuckrad, *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* 52 (Berlin–New York, 2004), 511–22.

⁵² Dan. 3 and 6.16–27. See, for instance, *Martyrdom of Paese and Thecla*, Reymond and Barns, *Four Martyrdoms*, 50 (trans. 162).

and my peace in the place where your bodies shall be laid. And behold, I have set the angel Raphael to minister to your shrine; and great numbers of sick people suffering from divers diseases shall come to your shrine, and obtain healing, and go home in peace. And whoso shall give alms to a poor person, or a stranger, or a widow on the day of your commemoration, I will not leave him lacking for any good thing for ever. Fear not, but be strong and firm; for I am with you."⁵³

Baumeister ignored some of these elements, and interpreted others as revealing the "Kontinuität des ägyptischen Denkens." This poses two important problems. The first, already alluded to above, is whether continuity of literary themes, or even continuity of practice, necessarily imply continuity of thought or belief. The second is whether in the case of the *koptischer Konsens* we are really—and always—in the presence of "continuity." To be sure, ancient Egyptian literary motifs still circulated, many of them mediated through the Greek novel, and some did find their way into late Coptic hagiography. However, the overwhelmingly Egyptian impression made on the reader of these texts is not so much linked to the presence of pharaonic themes. Rather, it comes from the transformation of a whole literary and historical tradition into a local story, from the fact that everything is *presented* as being Egyptian and inscribed into the Egyptian landscape, especially through a strong insistence on topographical detail. The bodies of the martyrs, having acquired great power through their sacrifice, are imaginatively distributed throughout the Valley in the form of relics, thus sanctifying the country and turning it into a holy land in its own right.⁵⁴

The emphasis on torture and suffering, however, served another purpose. As we already saw, in constructing its legitimacy, the Coptic Church needed to promote its indigenous character, and thus the continuity with its most distant past, both in territorial and in ethnic terms. The total break, both political and mental, that this entailed with the imperial church in Constantinople created a new need, that of displaying the institutional continuity with the Church of the past. It needed to show its religious legitimacy, by recognizing both its distinction from the other Church and its continuous identity over time, all the way back to its very creation. The uninterrupted *History of the Coptic Church* was the most evident aspect of this endeavor. Although less conspicuously, much of the hagiographical production worked

⁵³ *Martyrdom of Paese and Thecla*, Reymond and Barns (their trans.), *Four Martyrdoms*, 181–82.

⁵⁴ For an analysis of this theme see A. Papaconstantinou, "‘Là où le péché abondait, la grâce a surabondé’: Sur les lieux de culte

dédiés aux saints dans l’Égypte des Ve–VIIIe siècles,” in *Le sacré et son inscription dans l’espace à Byzance et en Occident: Études comparées*, ed. Michel Kaplan, *Byzantina Sorbonensia* 18 (Paris, 2001), 245–47.

in the same direction. Ever since the fourth century the earlier, epic times of persecution were considered to be the founding period of the Christian Church, and many groups tried hard to claim them as their own.⁵⁵ This is exactly what the Coptic Church did in the seventh and eighth centuries when it rewrote the history of the persecutions through the lives and passions of those who had purportedly witnessed them: it tried “to wrest the legacy of the persecuted church” from what it perceived as its main rival.⁵⁶

The century and a half following the conquest was a period of active mythmaking. The characteristics of Coptic martyr literature mentioned above all contribute to the construction of a new foundational myth for the Coptic Church. To completely appropriate the persecution *epos*, the Egyptian Christian community also needed to appropriate all the key figures of the pre-Constantinian Church of the Martyrs.⁵⁷ The Great Persecution of Diocletian acquired the status of a founding event. It was the last persecution, and it was followed by the official recognition of Christianity and by strife within the Church concerning, among other things, what should be done with the undoubtedly many Christians who had not chosen the path of martyrdom.⁵⁸ The reign of Diocletian also left its mark on Egypt through his important reforms of the administration and organization of the country. All this may partly explain why the Church chose as its foundational myth Diocletian’s persecution rather than earlier ones, which had also touched the country. Toward the end of the fourth century, there appeared an “Era of Diocletian,” whose starting point was 284, the year of the emperor’s accession. This era, however, was first used mainly in horoscopes and private inscriptions, and became common only after the Arab conquest. From the early ‘Abbāsid period, the Coptic Church gradually transformed it into the “Era of the Martyrs,” thus officially placing the beginning of its history with the martyrs of the Great Persecution.

The Coptic Church also appropriated two figures central to the history of martyrdom. One of them was the emblematic figure of first martyr. Until the Arab conquest, Stephen the Archdeacon had been undisputed in this role, even in Egypt. Now a Coptic legend from the Theban region claimed this was wrong. The first martyr was not Stephen, but the young Eudaimon, a native of the city of

55 R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990).

56 Ibid., 85.

57 On communal narratives and their annexation of idealized figures such as martyrs or “superstar ascetics” (although the two are not on exactly the same level), see Sizgorich, “Narrative and Community,”

22–26 (n. 22 above).

58 This led to what is commonly known as the Melitian schism, on which there is no synthetic work apart from the unpublished dissertation by S. T. Carroll, “The Melitian Schism: Coptic Christianity and the Egyptian Church” (Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, 1989); see also A. Camplani,

“In margine alla storia dei Meliziani,” *Augustinianum* 30 (1990): 313–51; H. Hauben, “La première année du schisme mélitien (305/306),” *Ancient Society* 20 (1989): 267–80; and Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 303–9.

Hermonthis in Upper Egypt, who suffered while Jesus was still a newborn. When the Holy Family fled to Egypt they settled for some time in al-Ashmūneyn (Hermopolis), unknown to all. An angel revealed the secret to Eudaimon, who went to al-Ashmūneyn, recognized the son of God, and worshipped him. Afterward, he no longer wished to take part in the adoration of pagan deities, so he was eventually put to death by his fellow citizens.⁵⁹ Eudaimon never became a popular saint, and his story seems to have circulated only in relatively closed circles in Upper Egypt. But fame was not the aim of the legend. What mattered was the statement that the first person to recognize the divinity of Jesus and to die for it was an Egyptian. The event was set so early, that it became all but impossible for anyone to challenge Egyptian primacy on this question.

The second appropriated figure was that of the great persecutor. The legend concerning Diocletian, much better known than that of Eudaimon, circulated widely, appearing in most texts of the Basilides cycle. Diocletian was born into an Egyptian Christian family, and initially bore the name Agrippidas. He was a shepherd in the region of Pshoi in Upper Egypt, and was recruited as a soldier for the Persian campaign of the emperor Numerius. He ended up serving in the imperial court at Antioch, where the emperor's daughter fell in love with him and married him. After her father's death, he became emperor, but after being vexed on some matter by the patriarch of Antioch, he apostatized and started persecuting the Christians.⁶⁰

All these texts and legends point in the same direction. The post-Constantinian Church as a whole claimed to be the direct heir of the persecuted Church.⁶¹ The sacrifice of the martyrs was seen as the founding act of the new, dominant Christian community.⁶² This claim was all the stronger as it had been for a time contested by "fundamentalist" groups such as the Melitians, who could admittedly lay a better claim to being the Church of the Martyrs, a name they posted on the doors of their churches.⁶³ Likewise, in the hagiographical production of the postconquest Monophysite Church, all the central characters in this story of martyrdom and persecution were once again—and even more radically—co-opted, so that the legendary history of the origins of the

59 D. O'Leary, *The Saints of Egypt* (London, 1937), 133.

60 J. Schwartz, "Dioclétien dans la littérature copte," *BSAC* 15 (1958–60): 151–66; G. van den Berg-Ontswedder, "Diocletian in the Coptic Tradition," *BSAC* 29 (1990): 87–122.

61 Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 89–95 and passim.

62 See also the remarks on primal dismemberment myths as community-

foundation acts in Frankfurter, "On Sacrifice and Residues," 518–19 (n. 51 above).

63 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 68.3.7; see H. Hauben, "The Melitian 'Church of the Martyrs': Christian Dissenters in Ancient Egypt," in *Ancient History in a Modern University*, vol. 2, *Early Christianity, Late Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. T. W. Hillard, R. A. Kearsley, C. E. V. Nixon, and A. M. Nobbs (Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge,

1998), 329–49. The Coptic Church did not claim continuity with the Melitians: it firmly held Athanasius—the Melitians' opponent—to be its spiritual forefather. Structurally, however, the Melitians' claim to the legitimacy conferred by direct filiation with the martyrs filled a similar purpose, even though, as Hauben (344–47) shows, the division here did not at all run along ethnic lines.

Coptic Church became entirely indigenous. By making the persecutor Diocletian an Egyptian, the Egyptian Church made for itself a sort of Judas Iscariot, the necessary renegade, the person through whom the founding sacrifice became possible. In this way, the Coptic community in Islamic Egypt created its own narrative of salvation, a narrative that was entirely independent and self-sufficient.

Appropriation went well beyond the actors of the persecutions. Key characters like the great Alexandrian bishops Athanasius or Cyril were presented as being part of the natural ancestors of the Coptic patriarchate. Among the great monks whose example Samuel of Kalamun is praised for having followed are not only his local predecessors Anthony, Pachomius, Macarius, and Shenoute, but also Severus of Antioch and, more unexpected, Basil of Caesarea and “Gregory” (probably of Nazianzus).⁶⁴ Many Greek patristic texts translated in earlier periods continued to be copied, and new texts written after the conquest were ascribed to real or imaginary Greek and even Latin church fathers.⁶⁵ All these elements reinforced the link the Coptic Church made with pre-Chalcedonian Christianity, so as to demonstrate its institutional continuity.

The task facing Egyptian Monophysite authors, to declare their indigenous origins, also had a linguistic side. The choice of Coptic to address what must have been a still-largely-bilingual public is in itself significant. It went hand in hand with the notion that the Romans—who were of course understood to speak Greek—were foreigners and heretics. The turn toward Egyptian themes and forms was by no means inevitable, and Greek culture was slowly lost often by choice rather than by an inability to keep up with a sophisticated foreign cultural system. After the Arab conquest Greek was used for over half a century in official documents, and when it eventually disappeared, it gave way to Arabic, not to Coptic.⁶⁶ Alexander II, a Monophysite patriarch of the eighth century, still wrote his annual Paschal letter in Greek in 724, and inventories of contemporary ecclesiastical libraries show the

⁶⁴ *Life* 41 (Alcock, 115).

⁶⁵ On late Coptic pseudepigrapha see Orlandi, “Introduzione,” 6 and 14–16 (n. 18 above).

⁶⁶ This question has not yet been thoroughly addressed for Egypt, although see the—at times apologetic—studies by L. S. B. MacCoull: “The Strange Death of Coptic Culture,” *Coptic Church Review* 10 (1989): 34–45; “Three Cultures under Arab Rule: The Fate of Coptic,” *BSAC* 27 (1985): 61–70; and “The Paschal Letter of Alexander

II, Patriarch of Alexandria: A Greek Defense of Coptic Theology under Arab Rule,” *DOP* 44 (1990): 27–40, all three reprinted in her *Coptic Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, 1993), nos. XXVI, XXV, and XIX; see also the references in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 287n. 88 (n. 15 above). For Egypt’s eastern neighbors see now D. J. Wasserstein, “Why did Arabic Succeed Where Greek Failed? Language Change in the Near East after Muhammad,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22 (2003): 257–72 and

R. Hoyland, “Language and Identity: The Twin Histories of Arabic and Aramaic (and: Why did Aramaic Succeed where Greek Failed?)” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 23 (2004): 191–98.

presence of Greek books.⁶⁷ Dating formulae were written in Greek as late as the twelfth century, and even cities were sometimes given their Greek names, like Πανὸς πόλις (city of Pan), although the city had a common Arabic name, Akhmīm, derived from the Coptic Shmin.⁶⁸ Conspicuously Greek pagan names were common among the elites, and the Roman administration's honorifics were bestowed upon village officials, even Muslims, until the late eighth century.⁶⁹ To some extent, of course, these examples show simply that Greek remained a language of prestige, not that it was commonly used or understood by the population, or even the elites.

Language is a vehicle of culture in many and varied ways.⁷⁰ The translation of a religious message into a language long associated with another religious tradition inevitably brings with it slight shifts in meaning and faces connotations that have been stamped in the language for centuries. This was a problem early Greek-speaking Christians faced and resolved as best they could, by transforming and integrating key concepts of Hellenism into Christian discourse.⁷¹ Perhaps in order to avoid this difficulty, the first Christians writing in Coptic extensively used Greek terms, especially for theological notions. But the language's structure and essence remained Egyptian, and so did much of its vocabulary. So, for instance, "god" in Coptic Christian texts is *noute* and the otherworld was *Amente*, terms originating from ancient religion. Most of these words were part of the natural continuity of the language and were used from the very beginning without being considered specifically "pagan." After the conquest, some of the adopted Greek terms are translated into Coptic for the first time. Thus, among the titles given to the martyrs, a Coptic expression such as *nref'jro klam name* ("truly crowned by victory") is found in some documentary texts instead of the usual Greek στεφανόφορος; or, the Greek λαμπρότατος, itself a translation of the Latin *clarissimus*, is replaced in some of these texts by the Coptic *ettaïēu*.⁷²

67 MacCoull, "Paschal Letter," in *Papyri, Ostraca, Parchments and Waxed Tablets in the Leiden Papyrological Institute*, F. A. J. Hoogendijk and P. van Minnen, *Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava* 25 (Leiden, 1991), 40–77, no. 13. On late use of Greek in Egypt, see also K. A. Worp, "Studien zu spät-griechischen, koptischen und arabischen Papyri," *BSAC* 26 (1984), 99–108.

68 Crum, *Coptic Manuscripts*, no. 489 (n. 2 above).

69 A. Papaconstantinou, "What Remains Behind': Hellenism and *Romanitas* in Christian Egypt after the Arab Conquest," in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and*

Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East, ed. H. Cotton and R. Hoyland (Cambridge, forthcoming).

70 See, e.g., B. Meyer, "Beyond Syncretism: Translation and Diabolization in the Appropriation of Protestantism in Africa," in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. C. Stewart and R. Shaw (London, 1994), 44–68.

71 Much has been written on this question. The most comprehensive and thought-provoking study remains Av. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley, 1991); see also G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism*

in Late Antiquity (Cambridge, 1990), esp. chaps. 1 and 2.

72 A. Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints en Égypte des Byzantins aux Abbassides* (Paris, 2001), 251; for legal terms, see the cases cited by T. S. Richter, *Rechtssemantik und forensische Rhetorik: Untersuchungen zu Wortschatz, Stil und Grammatik der Sprache koptischer Rechtsurkunden*, Kanobos, Forschungen zum griechisch-römischen Ägypten 3 (Leipzig, 2002), 118–28.

The use of terms such as *Amente* is as significant as the use of *χάρος* to name death in modern Greece: a natural element of linguistic continuity, it can take on an ideologically charged meaning when it is interpreted by nationalists as a mark of Graeco-Christian syncretism.⁷³ How a society construes at any given time the evident, and in itself neutral, continuity of its language depends on what self-definition that society needs to believe in.⁷⁴ Such self-construction had a long tradition in Egypt, not unrelated to an old tendency toward chauvinism and the glorification of the country. When Athanasius wrote the *Life of Anthony*, he argued for the holiness of the Egyptian desert against a long line of literature that presented Egypt as pagan and corrupt, the symbolic opposite of Palestine, the Holy Land.⁷⁵ Shortly before, writers in the newly created Coptic had started to take their first literary steps, probably among the Christian élite.⁷⁶ In much the same period, pagan, Greek-speaking Egyptians admired—in Greek—the local language and its unique capacity to convey certain messages:

*Hermes...often used to say to me...that those who read my books will think that they are very simply and clearly written, when in fact, quite on the contrary, they are unclear and hide the meaning of the words, and will become completely obscure when later on the Greeks will want to translate our language into their own, which will bring about a complete distortion and obfuscation of the text. Expressed in the original language, the discourse conveys its meaning clearly, for the very quality of the sounds and the [intonation] of the Egyptian words contains in itself the force of the things said.... Preserve this discourse untranslated, in order that such mysteries may be kept from the Greeks, and that their insolent, insipid, and meretricious manner of speech may not reduce to impotence the dignity and strength [of our language], and the cogent force of the words.*⁷⁷

After the Council of Chalcedon, and especially after Justinian's efforts to bring the anti-Chalcedonians back into the sphere of the imperial Church, the use of Coptic became a sign of resistance and identity among the non-Chalcedonians. This was partly because early on the language was very common in monasteries, which were to become the

73 On this question see C. Stewart, "Syncretism as a Dimension of Nationalist Discourse in Modern Greece," in Stewart and Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, 127–44 and more generally M. Herzfeld, *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece* (Houston, 1982).

74 This issue is touched upon several times in Hoyland, "Language and Identity," albeit from a different viewpoint; see

especially 188–89 (n. 66 above).

75 On this theme, based on Exodus, see Papaconstantinou, "Aux marges" (n. 3 above).

76 See Orlandi, "Letteratura copta," 46–49 (n. 18 above).

77 *Corpus hermeticum* 16.1–2, ed. A. D. Nock, trans. A.-J. Festugière (Paris, 1945), 2:231–32 and n. 5 for the term preceding "of the Egyptian words" (perhaps "power" or "force"); on this passage see G. Fowden,

The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1993), 37–38 (whose translation I have used with minor modifications).

pillars of the Monophysite Church.⁷⁸ Although it comes from another context, the above quotation shows some consciousness of the practical advantages of a language unknown to an adversary. After the Arab conquest, the tendency to use Coptic as an identity marker both intensified, as several notions until then left in Greek were translated into Coptic, and relaxed, giving way to nostalgia for a language that apparently kept much of its symbolic value.⁷⁹

It would be worthwhile to apply the same kind of analysis to Coptic art. Scholars have repeatedly noted the use of ancient Egyptian imagery, interpreting it here again as a survival. Among the examples one can quote is the looped cross, which reproduces the ancient ankh or sign of life, and the image of the Galaktotrophousa, showing the Virgin breastfeeding her baby, which repeats the traditional pattern of Isis feeding the baby Harpocrates.⁸⁰ Such images were efficiently appropriated by the Christians and made to fit perfectly into their discourse, much as mummification could be explained as belief in the resurrection of the body.⁸¹ However, the perpetuation of artistic forms could, if the need for self-definition made it necessary, be reinterpreted as yet another sign of the Coptic Church's essentially Egyptian identity. A careful study of such motifs and of related texts could show if and how their interpretation evolved over time, and whether they were indeed dragged into the discourse outlined here. One case indicates that at least some of them were: it is the appearance of "cynocephalus" saints after the conquest, while there is not trace of them in the preceding period.⁸² The figure comprising a human body with a dog's head was directly borrowed from the ancient religion, or more precisely from the imagery of the temples and tombs that were still standing and visible to all. Its introduction into Christian iconography after a hiatus of several centuries can hardly be interpreted otherwise than as a revival seeking to affirm cultural continuity with a now-distant past. The fact that the dog-headed god Anubis is often depicted holding an ankh may have played a role in the choice of that particular figure.⁸³

The particular relation entertained by the Copts with their specifically Egyptian religious background is of course, to a point, a sort of

78 See the evidence collected in S. Torallas Tovar, "La situación lingüística en los monasterios egipcios en los siglos IV–V," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 1 (2003): 233–45.

79 Papaconstantinou, "What Remains Behind" (n. 69 above).

80 L. Langener, *Isis lactans–Maria lactans: Untersuchungen zur koptischen Ikonographie, Arbeiten zum spätantiken und koptischen*

Ägypten 9 (Altenberge, 1996).

81 See for instance E. Bolman, "The Enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the Cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. M. Vassilaki (Aldershot, 2005), 13–22.

82 P. Saintyves, *Saint Christophe, successeur d'Anubis, d'Hermès et d'Héraclès* (Paris, 1936); A. Piankoff, "Deux saints à tête de

chien," *Bulletin de la Société d'archéologie copte* 12 (1946–47), 57–61; J. Doresse, *Des hiéroglyphes à la croix: CE que le passé pharaonique a légué au christianisme* (Istanbul, 1960), 45.

83 A suggestion for which I am again indebted to the anonymous DOP reader.

cultural destiny. But it is also a voluntarily constructed relation to the past, in which the origins of the community are recreated and reorganized so as to form the foundation of a new identity, taking the new political and religious situation into consideration. Otherwise normal continuity was invested with a specific value and used for a specific purpose; its usefulness in discourse meant that some of it would inevitably be reinvented.

In the Umayyad and early 'Abbāsid periods, much of the literature produced by the Egyptian Church aimed at renegotiating its identity and status. The ecclesiastical circles where these texts were written wanted to give the Christian community a model of behavior and an ideal image of itself. They claimed a common ethnic and religious origin, rooted in the community's sacralized territory, and they constructed a common religious memory, based on "the sacrifice of all those who had fallen on behalf of the community, to save it from destruction and to assure its sacred destiny."⁸⁴ In this process the early saints were essential instruments, since the "new" Coptic Church defined itself primarily as the real heir of the Church of the Martyrs.

In 1939 Robin Fedden wrote in *The Land of Egypt*, a book aimed at the general public, "Veneers of thought from abroad, that are now imported on steamers, but once came with dhows and triremes up the lost mouths of the Nile, wear off like varnish and lose their lustre.... Egypt is going neither French nor Levantine in spirit. The vast mass of the people remain untouched, and Egypt is still averse, as Herodotus once found it, to being anything but Egypt.... Attitudes and cultures change, but not Egypt or its people."⁸⁵ The idea, which here finds one of its most extreme expressions, is that whatever sweeps over the country, the Egyptian soul will not falter. Rooted in nineteenth-century nationalist conceptions, it has made its way into much—even recent—modern scholarship. I have here attempted to reverse this perspective. Instead of interpreting the postconquest Egyptianizing tendency as a re-emergence of long-suppressed cultural elements, I suggest that many of these elements were revived to create a new history for a redefined community. The ecclesiastical elites appropriated the local, pre-Christian tradition for themselves, to claim authenticity in a bid for power against a rival institution. That tradition was given new life by the very Church that had bitterly criticized it two centuries earlier—and some of it at least was reinvented as the Scottish Highland traditions of the Sobieski Stuarts or the 1896 Olympic Games.⁸⁶ It was then projected on a population of whom we know next to nothing, but which was not always as hostile to the Byzantine empire as their ecclesiastical leaders might lead us to believe.⁸⁷ The process was of course one of power conflict and legitimacy, but also one of mythmaking and

⁸⁴ A. D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford, 2003), vii–viii.

⁸⁵ (London), 3.

⁸⁶ H. Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1992), 15–41.

⁸⁷ Papaconstantinou, "What Remains Behind" (n. 69 above).

identity formation under circumstances that had durably changed the institutional status quo, quite reminiscent of postcolonial situations and of emerging nation-states.⁸⁸

Contrary to contemporary historical writings, seventh- and eighth-century Coptic hagiographical texts make no reference to Islam—perhaps in part because they claimed to date from before the conquest, but also because under the Umayyads, Islam was still but a virtual reality in the Egyptian countryside, where the occasions for inter-religious contact remained limited.⁸⁹ During the first two Islamic centuries, priority seems to have been given to the redefinition and consolidation of the Christian community. Only after this had been achieved was there within the Coptic Church an opening toward Arabic, and with it the end of linguistic segregation and a more active participation in the wider cultural world of the Islamic empire.⁹⁰

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This article originated in a paper delivered at the colloquium “Saints and Syncretism,” jointly organized by the three programs of study at Dumbarton Oaks in March 2002. I am very grateful to Alice-Mary Talbot for her invitation, support, and suggestions, and to Peter Brown, David Gwynn, Lennart Sundelin, and one of the anonymous *DOP* readers for discussing, sometimes at great length, several of the issues raised here. Special thanks are due to David Frankfurter, also a participant at the conference, who followed this paper from its conception to its final draft, offering valuable references, consequential comments, and stimulating contradiction. Our remaining points of disagreement will be obvious to those who know his work; less so perhaps, their crucial role in helping me clarify my argument.

88 Striking parallels can be found in medieval Armenia and Ethiopia (Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 66–77). Along with Smith’s work and the essays in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, one may consult the seminal work by B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London, 1991). For a similar analysis concerning Modern Greece, see Stewart, “Syncretism” (n. 72 above).

89 On the slow rate of Arab settlement in the Valley see M. Brett, “The Spread of Islam in Egypt and North Africa,” in *Northern Africa: Islam and Modernisation* (London, 1973), 4; G. Frantz-Murphy,

“Umayyads, Copts under the,” *CoptEnc*, 7:2287–88; H. Kennedy, “Egypt as a Province of the Islamic Caliphate, 641–868,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. C. F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 62–85; C. Décobert, “Sur l’arabisation et l’islamisation de l’Égypte médiévale,” in *Itinéraires d’Égypte: Mélanges offerts au père Maurice Martin, s.j.*, ed. C. Décobert (Cairo, 1992), 273–300; J.-C. Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale: Qus*, Textes arabes et études islamiques 6 (Cairo, 1976), 46.

90 See for instance J. den Heijer, “Recent Developments in Coptic-Arabic Studies (1992–1996),” *Ägypten in spätantiker und*

christlicher Zeit: Akten des 6. Koptologen-kongresses, Münster, 20.–26. Juli 1996, ed. S. Emmel and others (Wiesbaden, 1999), 49–64; S. Griffith, “The *Kitāb Miṣbāḥ al-‘Aql* of Severus ibn al-Muqaffā: A Profile of the Christian Creed in Arabic in Tenth-Century Egypt,” *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1996): 15–42; also the more general comments in Brown, *Rise*, 315–16 (n. 10 above).